

Over Seas and Stones: Reflections on Cambodia

HONORS THESIS

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By

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# **OVER SEAS AND STONES: REFLECTIONS ON CAMBODIA**

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# **Introduction**

*The new art or science which the electronic or post-mechanical age has to invent concerns the alchemy of social change – Marshall McLuhan*

**In early 2008, I went with Dr. Catherine Hawkins and a group of Texas State students to the country of Cambodia. The three weeks we spent there opened our minds and our hearts to Cambodia and the Khmer People.**

**It's been said that when we landed on the Moon and saw Earth from the lunar ground, we experienced a collective psychological change—a resonating interval had been established in which we were appeared on both sides of the images. For me, my experience in Cambodia has had a similar effect. It is not difficult to see the effects of industrialism and the American consumer attitude on Cambodia and similar countries. Right now the Angkor temples, one of the world's treasures, is being trampled by millions of tourists, sacked by thieves, and becoming more structurally unstable due to the expansion of the hotel industry in the neighbouring city, Siem Reap. A generation of elder Khmer are lamenting the end of an oral tradition because the youth are becoming progressively wired to the World Wide Web and the most modern gadgets. Some teenagers even believe the Khmer Rouge era never happened.**

**Nevertheless, Cambodia is a place of hopeful and warm people. These are people that remind you that we are part of a web of life. In the Hindu culture of Cambodia's past describes this web is identified as the god Indra's Net. Imagine a**

net stretched across the whole of the universe. The points at which the lines intersect--the nodes--are prisms that reflect the image of all the other jewels within the net. These days, I think that this metaphor is an accurate portrayal of how our world works—a network of relationships all mutually giving meaning to one another. Whether we realize it or not, our images are exported all across the world and marketed to developing countries whose citizens and government receive a message to industrialize and become wealthy as soon as they can—even if it is at the expense of their culture. A sad footnote to this thought is that the Khmer Rouge deliberately tried to erase Cambodia's history in order to progress as a country free of Western influence. Today, I see that the impulse is carried out more innocuously through unregulated development and a government that seems to want to serve the constantly arriving tourist crowds at the expense of the Khmer people.

I draw following stories from two months of this year spent in Cambodia. My perspective has been significantly affected because of the time I spent there. So much so that I decided to not complete an honors thesis in my major, psychology, and instead try my hand at a project that was, for me, off the beaten path.

My undergraduate education was a rollercoaster ride. At first, the ride didn't even seem that fun. Then I was introduced to Dr. Gus Lumia by way of the Honors program's course “Psychology of Consciousness.” Dr. Lumia encouraged me to study neuroscience, and really, every science; he taught us that science was a creative enterprise just like art. He also gave me valuable research experience. After that semester, I joined the honors program and I've never looked back. I was given the chance to have an integral education that encourages creativity and dialogue.

**After coming home from Cambodia in January, I decided that I wanted to write about the trip. I asked Dr. Dan Lochman to supervise my thesis; I knew Dr. Lochman from the honors class, Origins of Civilization. Since I've known him he has been an honest and friendly critic, encouraging me to write from the heart (but make it good!)**

**These stories represent transformation. From the reckless rucksacker to the heady student who thinks in bibliography sources, these are people that are changed by being in Cambodia. It's not typical for an author to need to introduce or explain his characters outside of their stories, but since this is semi-professional attempt, I hope you won't think it too strange for me to do so now.**

**Generally, these characters are people you would see or talk to frequently in Cambodia.**

**The story "Fever Dreams" tells about a backpacker who is travelling to experience spiritual enlightenment by way of adopting a very reckless attitude. What emerges from his misfortune is the realization that what he has been looking for and dropped out of Western society to find, is a role to play in this world.**

**Dobbsy, the main character in "Dog Days" was a challenge to write. He isn't a character I particularly like, but Phnom Penh's sex tourism industry is so all pervasive that it was a topic that needed to be introduced. Through his encounter with the sex worker and the western woman we see a man struggling to connect with a woman he can relate to, but who is absolutely clueless as to how to go about it. He interprets his continued failure as impossibility. He wanders precariously to the Heart of Darkness bar to see if he at all connects with the idea of hiring a sex worker.**

**What we see emerge in his psyche is the realization of just how disconnected he has become, and as a result, the consciousness of just how torn apart he is on the inside comes into view.**

**From these two proceeding chapters I tried to show how things can go wrong in a trial and error social experiment and how the characters, despite their intentions, act like social mosquitoes.**

**But the last few chapters of this work represent the absolute good that can come out of travelling to Cambodia. In Lanie's two stories (S-21, The Killing Fields), we travel alongside someone engaged in learning and connecting with the horrible events that happened during the Khmer Rouge era. These two chapters were easiest of all to write in that they emulate my overarching impression of Cambodia.**

**The last chapters of this work are the most concrete. The chapter "The Global Village" is a real highlight, as it is the story of a Khmer Rouge survivor, Siphen Meas. Here we meet Griff, a college student who has been to Cambodia before, but wanted to return and write about the experience formally. Griff carries on Lanie's emotional connection with the history of Cambodia and goes one step further by extending that into a moral argument. His essay after the final segue deals with language as a social ruler, ecotourism, the holistic interconnectedness of the world, technology, and globalization. His aim is to help guide us toward a future that considers the extent to which cultures influence each other.**

**This work marks the end of my undergraduate education, as well as the end of a year in which I feel I've really found myself as a person. The time I spent in Cambodia this year forged within me a global identity and when I returned home, I**

**still felt as if I was on a journey—still wandering around like a tourist marvelling at exotic people. I am thankful that there have been many people to support me throughout my undergraduate years—most especially my parents, Ward and Kenna Starrak. I am thankful to everyone that opened doors and made my academic experience more of a running dialogue, especially the warm people of the University Honors Program, Dr. Catherine Hawkins, and Dr. Dan Lochman.**

**Thanks for reading my work. If you'd like to get in contact with me, try  
[cstarrak@gmail.com](mailto:cstarrak@gmail.com).**

**Chad Starrak**

**Texas and Cambodia, 2008**

# Prologue

**Before the Pontoon sank, neither of them knew each other. They all arrived separately.**

**This was a chance meeting of strangers on a strange night.**  
**They were all ready to leave the country. They just wanted one last night out in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. They couldn't have known that three hours after the main crowd arrived to drink and dance and to celebrate their travels, the boat on which they were dancing to trance electronic music would start slowly shifting and taking on water from the Mekong River. And when the small puddles became larger and started flooding the dance floor and when the Cambodian girls started unhooking electronic DJ equipment and hauling it across the suspension bridge to the bank, some people just stood at the entrance and watched the water come into the bar, wondering how far they would sink into the river.**

**Sandy just stood there, fascinated by the chaos erupting around him.**  
**Lanie was busy walking across the bridge, laughing at the group of drunken, panicked Australian girls behind her yelling for everyone to hurry across. From back inside the pontoon boat, she could hear someone else shouting not to crowd the bridge. She felt calm for the first time in a long while.**

**Dobbsy was already outside on the bank when all of this happened. He was filming the evacuation on a camcorder so he could put it on the internet, on some video sharing site. This was his own personal Titanic. Even better than that, despite the absence of starlets. Maybe because of that. He moved from group to group,**

joining conversations, trying to interview people. He was the gonzo journalist on the scene.

Griff helped people get from the sloping boat's dark and flooding dance floor to the entrance-- which was a problem for many inebriates in their slippery soles. He grabbed the hands of those struggling to make it to the doorway, across the suspension bridge, up the steep stairway of rocks and into the parking lot where everyone was now congregating. In all the commotion he had lost track of the friends he came with. So he stayed behind to survey the water's rise and to help evacuate the sinking vessel.

Half an hour later, everyone was off the boat, but it was still taking in water.

After everyone had fished their cameras out and snapped off a few pictures, what ultimately happened to the boat didn't matter. What was more important was where they were going next.

It was election weekend and the government had banned alcohol from being sold at most places. All the same, in the backpackers' district along the lake, alcohol was still being served. The party was still happening. Nobody here was planning on voting in the election. Nobody could.

Somebody suggested The Mosquito as a place where the party could go on all night. So that's where they went, this group of four strangers. They met randomly, piling into a tuk-tuk, and casually chatting during the 15-minute ride to Boeung Kak Lake on the northeast side of the city, in the backpackers' district.

Once there, they followed some other people just arriving around the corner, to a dingy bar that resembled a big living room with worn but comfortable couches, big

**round cushion-chairs, and a bar shaped like a boomerang. No music rang out into the humid lake atmosphere because the owners didn't want the cops to show up and shut the place down.**

**Sandy moved toward the bar with Dobbsy just behind. Sandy was a big guy, but Dobbsy could have been more than a foot shorter, wearing a backwards baseball cap with retro glasses. He chewed nervously on a cigar that was unlit. His long-sleeve pinstripe shirt showed an outline of drying sweat going all the way down to his waistline, his denim jeans were chewed up at the cuffs and his boots seemed almost too fashionable for a Third World country. Sandy was dressed simply: a black undershirt with black cargo shorts and flip flops, his long hair tied back.**

**Dobbsy flashed money in front of the bartender's line of sight: four dollar bills folded like a rooftop, waving for the Khmer teenager to come over.**

**He stuttered an order for a tequila sunrise.**

**Sandy followed that up by asking for a bottle of Angkor beer.**

**Dobbsy took the chewed-up cigar out of his mouth before he turned to Sandy and began the conversation with a nervous mutter, sounding something like, so, what's your story?**

## Fever Dreams

His eyes opened to see a kaleidoscopic, blurry sea of images. He scratched at the rash on his arm and heat gravitated there and hung like an itchy blister--the kind you get after accidentally touching the oven while it's on. Aches pulsed in his joints and a constant pressure seemed to hammer down on his bones. His eyes felt as if they had suddenly erupted into twin fireballs and a high-pitched squealing resonated in his sensorium like the omniscient voice of God if he was a cartoon chipmunk. He closed his eyes and grimaced as a wave of pain grew and ebbed away.

There had been days of this, but he was feeling as though he was coming out the other side. He wondered if he could actually do something like talk to some of the people around or if he should just rest or if the chipmunk howl would interfere with communication of any sort.

For a time he just kept sleeping. He was welcomed by a feverish dreamworld. He dreamed that the rash on his arm had become somehow infected and required amputation. The locals took him to a Buddhist Monastery. His parents were there, too. How'd they know where I was? When was the last time I talked to them? Wait, he thought, how do they perform surgery in a pagoda? The Buddha gave him a sedative while his parents reassured him that they would be there to take care of him and bring him home to Texas.

He woke up again, post surgery. This time with a dry throat. He motioned to a monk in an orange saffron robe and asked for water—it seemed like one molecule alone would give some relief to this hot, crackling desert of a body.

**It took a second for the monk to understand the small croak—not an English dialect frequently heard in Cambodia—but he understood on the third or fourth rasp and hurried off, yelling something in Khmer to one of his monk buddies.**

**He saw them bring back a glass of water with a lemon on top of it, kind of like how you would get it in a restaurant. Very nice. For a second he wondered if the water he was drinking was really okay, but he decided that things really couldn't get any worse.**

**He fell back asleep and consciousness was allusive.**

**Sometimes he would be awake for a long enough time that the monks thought he was getting better and wanted to talk. One or two of them would come to his bed and try to practice English. They spoke very well, actually. But that makes sense considering they live such a structured life. Wake up at 5 am and study. Go to morning prayers. Meditate. Go out into the city with a matching orange parasol and beg for your meal. Go back to the pagoda and share. Study for the rest of the day. He knew this because every time he would get lost on the streets of Phnom Penh he would just look around and try to peer through the busy scene of unending motorcycles and traffic, ignore the drivers dressed in clothes that hadn't been washed in weeks, asking him if he wanted a ride, yelling Moto, sir! Moto! And then he would head toward the nearest Buddhist Temple.**

**He knew that he could probably get directions there because the monks speak such great English. He then would ask them about how their day was going and try to make casual conversation. They would circle around him in their robes, with their holy books under their arms, in a varied assortment of rubber flip-flops,**

watching one of their buddies trying to talk to me. They would giggle like children when he answered or asked questions. It was a funny occasion—every occasion.

He had basically lost track of time, but being on an aimless itinerary for the last few months had made him almost completely forget what day it was or the time. He would have to ask people the date because it just wasn't that relevant the majority of the time--he had nothing planned until the last minute.

So when he woke up in Phnom Penh and didn't know what day it was or even really where he was, he didn't panic or anything. Instead, he just wanted to walk around and stretch his legs—just wake up gradually and have a look at the place. It must have been around nine or ten in the morning; most of the monks weren't around because they were out in the city, standing in front of houses or business, collecting alms from the community and testing their consciences.

He wandered out of one entrance to a small courtyard with a stone courtyard. Around the edges big statues of what he assumed to be Buddhist gods stood. One statue in particular has a protruding ribcage, as though he hasn't eaten for months. Or maybe he had dengue fever.

A young and thin monk walked up to him and asked, "Feeling better today?" Sandy lowered his head out of courtesy and said quietly "Yeah, I think the fever has broken."

The phrase gained a questioning look from the monk. Sandy corrected himself. It's gone, I mean. I'm feeling better.

The monk nodded and smiled. A moment of silence passed, carrying sounds from the street outside the pagoda's concrete walls.

**The monk said, excuse me, where are you from?**

**This is the standard opening script for most conversations between Cambodians and foreigners.**

**Texas. It's in the United States. In the south by Mexico.**

**The monk thought and repeated the word Mexico, then said, oh, yes. I know—  
Tex-as.**

**Yeah.**

**Sandy waited a second and then started to give a condensed version of his travels.**

**Well, I've been travelling for about four months now. I went to Japan and stayed there for a while. Then went through the Philippines and then flew to Bangkok. Then I took a bus here to Phnom Penh. I stayed for a little while and made some friends, and they convinced me to go to Saigon—Vietnam—with them. So, we took a bus down to Vietnam for a week, but I decided to come back to Cambodia.**

**He didn't mention how it came about that most of his money was either lost or stolen shortly before coming down with his illness. These sorts of details require an explanation that cannot be abbreviated into one or two sentences.**

**If he could, he would have told the monk how he started travelling because he wanted to know what enlightenment was and that the first step was trying to figure out what's important. It made sense in a sort of Dharma Bums way that he could only do that by losing it all—by gambling his money, his time, his life, in one situation after another. It was as if the countries he had passed through were one continuous game of poker or a slot machine—one of these days he would get lucky**

and strike spiritual gold. He would become as wise as a sage from the *Tao Te Ching*. Like the Buddha. The way he saw it, a feeling of unimaginable bliss would rise up from the tangled and clouded web of thoughts and memories residing in his brain like ghosts. He would forget all of that and see something that wasn't there before—a way carved out in some new feeling. An instruction manual for life.

That's what guys like Kerouac wanted. And Thoreau before him. They wanted to get lost in some wilderness until they awoke from the slumber of reality and realized something true, like the billowing of wind flowing through an empty valley. A transcendental feeling beyond words.

He came here because Cambodia, more than every other country he had seen, was a country resembling the Wild West. When he realized this, he knew that this would be the place to make the gamble and raise the stakes. Here he could accelerate the process of enlightenment. He could attain Nirvana in a matter of days.

But instead of telling this monk that, he just talked about the country of Cambodia and some of his favourite parts like the Angkor Temples and the local pagodas. He laughed and told him about going to a temple that you have to climb hundreds of stairs up a mountain side to get to and little children walk beside you and give you information about the place, all the while expecting some money.

After a bit, the monk patted him gently on the shoulder and said to get well soon.

Sandy moved around the courtyard, looking at all the different flower arrangements. While he studied them, a woman napping in a hammock looked over to him with a wonder that equalled his. He felt sure that if she had had a camera she

would have taken a picture of him. He stopped to scratch the head of a napping dog lying on the concrete—one of the monastery's pets. He looked up at the buildings around him, his eyes gravitating to the pagoda's architecture and settling on the statues at each corner. They were huge bird-men, called garudas—a remnant of Cambodia's Hindu past.

He walked over to the entrance of the monastery, wanting to see the busy streets. Outside the entrance flanked on either side were naga statues, serpent-gods whose tails snaked up into the air and joined to form an entranceway. Outside the pagoda's walls, vendors sold bottled water, magazines, and sim cards for cell phones. In the street, cars, motorcycles and tuk-tuks still streamed up and down the street. As he stood there watching the scene before him, a woman holding a baby in her arms came up, begging for money. She couldn't speak English but made an eating motion with one hand. He waved his hands and said no, sorry, he didn't have any money.

I don't have any money and the last time I wanted to give, I managed to lose more than I bargained for. It must have been some weeks ago by now.

He tried to fight past the fatigue and remember it. It was a pretty normal day, by most standards: he had woken up at the Blue Dog hostel and gone down to the Lucky Burger restaurant for a coffee. After that he remembered walking back and using the internet. He had answered some emails and listened to music because he was a bit homesick. When he took a break and walked out of the internet café to get water, he saw a beggar woman. He wanted to give her money because he always felt so genuinely happy to give to the monks begging for alms, and he had started to

**expand his generosity to the poor Khmer he saw, who he pretended were monks. He went to the corner to get water and came back. He saw the woman was gone, so he went back into the café. When he was done using the computer, he went to the small desk at the front and got the total from the teenage Khmer boy. He reached into the pocket of his shorts for his wallet. It wasn't there. After frantically checking the computer station and the outside street, he was sure it wasn't anywhere.**

**The boy in the café didn't speak much English but he knew Sandy didn't have any money. He said it was okay and let him go.**

**As he was walking back down at the street he reminded himself: this is enlightenment. Not being attached to anything, especially money.**

**Being enlightened still meant that you needed food, though. And you needed a place to sleep. He worked out a deal with Rudi, the owner of the Blue Dog hostel. He would teach English to him, his two workers, and his wife during the day. He would help them learn to write and translate words from magazines and books that other travellers had left there—magazines like *People* and *Newsweek* and tour guide booklets.**

**He would go to the local hotels in the area and try to find tourists that needed a tour guide for the price of a meal. He would take people to the pagodas and share what he knew of Buddhism and Cambodia's religious customs. They would go to Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Memorial outside of town. He would take them to restaurants on the river and to the Royal Palace and to meditation class at Wat Langka.**

**For a while, it was easy.**

**Then he became sick with dengue. It could have happened because he was running around Cambodia all day and never once thought to wear some sort of insect repellent. He had been too reckless.**

**When you get dengue fever, there isn't a whole lot that can be done. It has to be allowed to run its course, and you just try to stay as hydrated as you can.**

**The time he spent in bed lapsing from one semi-conscious state to the next gave him plenty of time to process everything that had happened to him.**

**One morning, he felt the best he had in weeks and wanted to call home.**

**He left his room and told Rudi he was going out for a bit. He went down the street to an internet café and asked to call home, admitting that he didn't have any money. The attendant nodded and led him to a small booth with a computer and a small fan hung in the corner. He dialed the number using a computer program and reached across the desk and picked up the USB phone receiver.**

**The ringing seemed very far away.**

**His mom picked up the phone.**

**Hey Mom, it's me.**

**Sandy, my god. We haven't heard from you in a while, we were worried as all hell. Is everything all right?**

**No, it isn't. I got sick. I lost my money. I'm okay now though. I want to come home. Can you help me out, please? I'm sorry I messed up. I thought I could do all it all myself.**

**His dad got on the other line.**

**Sandy told them all that had happened.**

**They said they would be glad to send him some money to get him home.**

**He said you don't know how thankful I am that you're helping me out. I love you guys. But I want you to know that I figured out why I felt driven to come across the world like I've been doing. Why I had to see what was out there. It was important for me to drop out of society and get some perspective on things. I needed to know my place and I just wasn't finding it back in the States. It seems like I've been pushed into living the American dream and I wasn't doing that so I wasn't sure who I was becoming or what I was doing. What I found out was that I needed a role, a part to play in life's theatre. I've always felt that our society was telling me otherwise: to fragment myself from my surroundings and specialize in one area of knowledge, almost as if the machines that drive industry are something to be emulated. Before I could grow up I had to figure out how to do that. And while I might not be quite there yet, I think I've passed that threshold of confusion and anxiety. I'm not bound by the dreams of society. I've woken up finally and I'm coming home.**



**At the Mosquito Bar, Sandy was done telling his story and fell quiet, as if he were reflecting on all that had happened.**

**Dobbsy set the cigar down on a napkin. The chewed up end looked like a rubber dog toy complete with slobber. He ran a nervous hand across his two-week-old beard, scratching absent mindedly, then remarked,**

**“Why didn’t you just stay at home and do drugs, ya know, like normal people do?”**

**Sandy laughed and said, “That’s all been done. I wanted to be an explorer. An astronaut. A pioneer.”**

**“What were you hoping to discover? Some piece of information covertly hidden from everyone, waiting for you to stumble on it foolishly?”**

**“Nah. I’m not looking for fame, even if I draw inspiration from a writer like Keroauc. I just wanted to reconnect.”**

**Dobbsy sneered into his glass of beer as cynical thoughts passed through his**

**mind, an ancient reflex. Only this time, he stopped them from collecting and sabotaging his thoughts. He had dealt with this nausea far too long; he decided it was time to tell his story instead of judging the merits of others. How he had come to Cambodia because he knew it was one of the last places on Earth he could actually be free and exploit that freedom to its limit. He was a hunter of pleasure and had a hound's nose for the chaotic. He could sniff out chaos a mile away, would find such scenes with his camera and note pad, would make notes for some article to be published on his on-line blog so all his cyberspace friends could know he was a genius, and more importantly, so he could have his finger on the Future's pulse.**

**Dobbsy, he was probably an atheist before he realized how much he didn't care about religion or didn't understand it, or didn't care to try and understand it. See, he had this theory that everyone in the world was as clueless as he was, and that, despite their superior acting skills, deep inside they were just as sick as he was about not knowing what was going on. He was like a hunter who pretends that killing a buck with an AK-47 is the way the world works. The law of the jungle is Nietzsche's Will to Power, which dwells in everything struggling to live at the expense of another. In his mind, he was evolution's champion. He was ahead of the curve. He knew the world craved a sort of madness that they couldn't commit to, were scared to commit to.**

**Most people travel because they want to inject a sense of adventure into their lives. But Dobbsy wanted to show the blogosphere that adventure was just a feeling and that feelings couldn't be trusted. The vacations to India and the whole humanities package, it was all just a way of boosting self-esteem, a means to an end;**

**and, because it was a means to an end, the local culture didn't matter. The culture's history didn't matter. It was a cute game: you go to another country and play like you're interested, but then you return home and forget, so what's the point, he reasoned.**

**Deep down, Dobbsy wanted to be wrong in a world where everything was right.**

**He wanted a complication to the plot of his life; he wanted to see outside of the tunnel his mind had fashioned throughout the years of education, of autodidactism, of philosophical anarchy.**

**Which led him to the Heart of Darkness, the single most advertised bar in Phnom Penh--a tourist trap for hedonists. Most taxi drivers don't know much English, but they sure know how to get to Street 86.**

## Dog Days

He turns his head slightly to take a look at the people coming into the hotel lobby. They pass by a shrine to the Buddha and head up to the desk. The whole time, the concierge is flanking them, a walkie-talkie in his hand, and he's checking them into the hotel with great care.

Dobbsy turns his head from the scene and looks out the door to see two monks standing silently in the early morning sun, alms bags outstretched, while a Khmer girl and her mother give them riel, the local currency. The little girl first acts as though she's somehow afraid of them but laughs after she puts the money into their bags.

He again turns his head away from the scene, back to the computer, unaffected by what he saw.

He types a journal entry into a web browser to publish it online.

*11 am – Asia Hotel, Monivong Avenue*

*I woke up and took a shower—cold water only. The inside of my mouth tasted horrible on account of the valium and codiene I had swallowed before bed. Or maybe it had to do with the umpteen beers I drank while perusing the city's night life: drinks at Red Spark and its live band, drinks at Blue Spark (the next building over) and dancing with a predominantly Khmer crowd, wandering over to the Heart of Darkness bar, on the oh-so famous street 86. There was a gaggle of tourists and Khmer young-elites, drinking at private tables with military bodyguards surrounding them.*

*Brushed my teeth with bottled water on account of the foreign microbes in the tap water. I grabbed an Angkor beer from green fridge, blotched with rust like eczema, and sat down in front of an older model SONY television. It still had rabbit ears on the back.*

*I was feeling a bit of generalized anxiety and so I unwilling to venture from my room, so I ordered room service to bring me an omelette sandwich and coffee for breakfast, even though it was technically lunch time.*

*Downstairs in the lobby, there is a huge as hell KFC restaurant with a perpetual crowd of Japanese tourists eating what never appears to be fried chicken. It's always some noodle concoction I see them lifting with chopsticks into their mouths. I've never been in the place—it doesn't really seem like my thing.*

*Room service brings the meal. It costs three bucks, which is 12,000 riel. I give a 10,000 riel bill and four 500 riel bills to the teenage girl who brought it on a small, plastic tray and set it on the desk by the door. The egg sandwich is between two big, crunchy baguettes. The coffee comes in a regular glass, not a mug, and with condensed milk, which is a sweetener and milk rolled into one. It pools down at the bottom of the glass, a thick syrup until you stir it, then it disperses, making the coffee light brown; some remainder sits concavely on the bottom of the glass, looking like little white mountains.*

*The afternoon is a waste of time, I think. Most people are busy with jobs or touring around—sight-seeing, as they say. I've done all that really. I've seen the Toul Sleng Genocide museum, where they kept prisoners before they executed them in the Khmer Rouge era. I've seen all the pagodas I need to and have taken the obligatory meditation classes at Wat Langka. I've been outside the city to the genocide memorial and taken the obligatory guided tour.*

*So I mainly just wait around until it's 5 or 6 o'clock, when the real fun begins.*

*I go to pharmacies and browse the stacks of medication like you would a library.*

*Most of them are expired, but that doesn't really matter to me. I pick up what's interesting and test it out.*

*Getting what you want is fairly easy: I write the word like Adderall or Ritalin on a piece of paper that the pharmacy clerk, an older woman, hands to me. Just to see what happens.*

*When I come back to the hotel, I sit on the bed and watch television for a few hours or listen to music. I get on the internet and research good bars to go to later on.*

*And now the reader will, no doubt, like to know why I'm in Cambodia of all places and what makes me stay here.*

*The short answer is: I wanted to find a place that would end my nihilism. I wasn't sure that such a place existed. My ambitions have always exceeded my grasp. So, I am at least a failure in that I can neither levitate nor teach a chicken how to play a banjo. And I have no idea what to do with my college diploma other than hang it around my head for props or fashion it into a paper-hat and attend keg parties as a tyrannical king of the mountain, shouting down anyone who questions me, pretending that philosophy is anything but an invisible fencing match in which the champion will always be the one who makes himself scarce first, leaving a skeleton of philosophical giants to use the blade for him. If this fails, it is of course distinctly possible to use the Socratic Method in order to render opponents totally confused by their own pluralistic positions. You make him into a pretzel and call it a day, paper crown still intact, while others are oblivious that the argument you just levelled is in no way analogous to your day-to-day life. You've just read*

*too much as a kid, then a teenager, then a college student. Then one night you got the drop on some unsuspecting competition.*

*But this tangent doesn't satisfy the question: why here? Why Cambodia? Well, you could say that I wanted to test the extent of my hubris out in the field, away from my kingdom and keg parties.*

**He finished writing, got up, and paid for the time he spent using the computer.**

**He went outside. The hotel was near a small intersection connecting Monivong Boulevard to a smaller street, whose name was only a number. He started to smoke but had to simultaneously fend off a crowd of tuk-tuk and moto drivers encircling him, asking for cigarettes, asking if he wanted to go to Toul Sleng Museum or the Genocide Memorial outside of town. They were relentless: after he said no, they asked if he wanted to go outside the city and shoot AK-47s and uzis. He said that sounded like a good time, but he told them he needed to think about it—addressing them collectively, not sure who out of the crowd of faces had asked first. He decided to go back inside and get his things, then approach one driver straight out of the door to take him to the shooting range.**

**Returning inside the lobby and over to the clerk's counter for the key, he walked into a conversation between a group of tourists and the hotel clerk. It seemed they were asking about the local sites, unsure where to go. He interrupted a translation session that seemed to involve the clerk telling the guys about Wat Phnom, a Buddhist temple situated on a large hill in the middle of a park.**

**Dobbsy interrupted the clerk, saying, ‘It's an okay temple but I had more fun**

**feeding the monkeys in the park. Cambodia's just got so many temples, and I have only so much attention. “**

**Dobbsy had the look of someone who knew about Phnom Penh, so the group of guys turned to him and started asking more questions.**

**“Is the genocide museum worth going to?”**

**Dobbsy replied, “Yeah, although it is quite sombre. I always see people I want to talk to, but no one seems to be in the mood to have a conversation. But hold on a second, who are you? I haven't seen you around the lobby before and I've been here a few days.**

**A Chicago accent cut the air as a hand stretched forward. He said, “I'm Tony.”**

**The tallest of the group said, “Reid,” and waved his hand.**

**A German voice came from the mouth of a small, smart-looking guy saying, “Michael.”**

**“And you can call me Dobbsy. It's a nickname I use while travelling. Listen, boys, let's forget about the sight-seeing for a bit and go have a drink by the Mekong.**

**They spent much of that afternoon hopping from restaurant to bar along the riverside. When the enthusiasm to keep ordering bottles of Australian and New Zealand wine ran out, they wandered through Phnom Penh's Skid Row, smoking and telling stories—about where they came from and what they were doing there**

**They stepped on loose gravel and broken glass while laughing. Khmer people sitting on the sides of abandoned buildings looked out dejectedly, begging for money with their eyes.**

**Then in his intoxicated enthusiasm, Dobbsy convinced the gang to go to the**

**“Heart of Darkness” bar on street 86.**

**The Heart of Darkness was so popular the owners didn't even need to advertise. You just say Street 86 and the tuk-tuk and moto drivers know where to go. They pull up right in front of a dark red building, the entrance surrounded with parked scooters and motorcycles, the doors guarded by military personnel checking the pockets of all who come in for weapons or drugs.**

**Dobbsy gets out from the cart and tells the boys to stay put while he goes inside to check out the scene. He is searched quickly by guards and passes through a line of other soldiers with automatic rifles. After opening the door, he disappears for a few seconds and then comes back out waving his hands, signalling the guys to leave the cart and come in.**

**“Yeah, it's looking pretty good in there, fellas.”**

**He turns around to try to pass the guards, but they stop him again and, one starts patting him down.**

**“You just did this. “**

**The soldier doesn't care what he said, he only cares that the customers aren't packing weapons. The bar has a bloody history of shootings.**

**The German guy, Michael, gets stopped briefly for trying to bring in some drum tobacco. He said the guards must think its some exotic type of grass.**

**When you enter the Heart of Darkness, you're surprised to see that, for a famous place, it isn't very big. There are tons of people scattered in pockets throughout. Khmer girls hang out in gaggles; you might have a conversation about how to tell which of the Khmer girls are working and who's really out to get a drink. By then**

**you'll have noticed a banquet table near the entrance that is surrounded by more guards. There's a whole swarm of young Khmers. They're most likely the kids of some politicians or high-ranking military officers.**

**The next day, Tony would tell a story about the girl he was talking to in the Heart of Darkness. About how she took out wads of cash from her purse and fanned it out for him to see, saying she didn't care about money. She had that much of it on her.**

**Many hours later, they all had danced and were covered in sweat, and got tired chain smoking cigarettes and downing bottles of Angkor beer.**

**It was then that Dobbsy started to get this cerebral itch.**

**While travelling in Cambodia, you can't help but notice all the ways sex is broadcasted and advertised.**

**You innocently walk into a building to karaoke with your friends, and as soon as you walk through the big glass double doors that there are two lines of young Khmer girls sitting and waiting in the entrance hall.**

**They're dressed in formals like the kind you'd see at a high school prom.**

**At an outside restaurant, you're surrounded by girls with short shorts, all carrying buckets of beer they're sponsored by and vying for a guy's attention.**

**Go to make a call at the Asia Hotel on Monivong, you'd notice that under the phone there's this laminated poster with a cost breakdown and you notice that the first entry says that massages cost 5 dollars an hour for a girl and 10 for a guy. You walk out of your hotel room and turn to lock the door and notice a bunch of Khmer girls living in rooms at the end of the hall. All the time you've stayed, there's been an**

**assortment of guys coming in and out. One day you see an old Korean guy and a young girl walk out of the same room, and it's right in your face.**

**Dobbsy took an empty seat at the bar. His feet barely touched the railing at the bottom. He put his feet there for a second but shuffled them to the base of the barstool.**

**Next to him he saw a Khmer girl, smiling a weird smile.**

**“You okay?”**

**He said, “Yeah, great now. How are you?”**

**She looked puzzled for a moment, then said, “I can't understand you.” She turned to a friend and carried on a conversation in Khmer. In a minute she looked back over at him and said in almost perfect English, “Do you need some company tonight?”**

**Dobbsy looked down into his glass and smiled. He was taken aback by such a direct question. A string of thoughts led him to recollect an idea he had had, about the English language being almost a form of currency here--how some people couldn't speak a sentence in English but knew how to ask if a guy wanted a girl or if he wanted to go see the genocide museums. The more English you spoke, the better you would do in this country. With the tourist industry booming, it was just about the only guarantee of stability for Cambodians knowing English.**

**A second thought that inched its way into Dobbsy's mind was a “what if.” He thought about how difficult the whole dating process had become to him back home. How women were now a totally foreign concept.**

**This feeling of total estrangement from the opposite sex— it's only accelerated**

by technology like the internet—a totally vicarious way to connect with the living.

Dobbsy had grown up in the age of computers; he'd grown up playing video games—little black and grey cartridges that projected an alternate reality. He'd been a part of the first generation of humans to grow through the awkward and impulsive teenage years while being simultaneously connected to a cybersphere. He'd cut his teeth as an amateur writer in the blogosphere.

You'd figure that all this connecting and surfing would have a price-tag attached to it. This computer and its internal system made of wires like nerves could extend your body across the whole planet. It was so powerful. But what becomes of someone who lives too long as a discarnate entity?

Right now in the Heart of Darkness, this guy called Dobbsy sits in a barstool and the electronic music is thumping and people are still dancing. He sits with the face of a grave spirit, this guy who won't tell the people in Phnom Penh his actual name or anything about him that's true.

When the girl asks Dobbsy again if he wants a lady, he says to her maybe he does. And she starts to hold his hand and smile at him. She leans in close to him and makes like she really wants to kiss him. But when their lips finally touch, it's like she's trying to bite his face off. She uses her whole mouth and mostly teeth. It's like she's never kissed anyone before now. Who would call having their mouth gnawed for half a minute a kiss?

Dobbsy gets up and goes to the furthest corner of the bar where the restrooms are. By the time he gets back, this girl, called "Allain," is talking to an American girl. As he gets closer, he notices that they're speaking Khmer.

**The American girl points to Dobbsy and says “Is he your \_\_\_\_\_” the last word being something in Khmer, as if it were a secret or an inside joke.**

**Allain laughs and pushes her hand into his.**

**Dobbsy stares blankly at the American girl, knowing that his silence indicates his shame.**

**He tries to pull himself out of this feeling of embarrassment by reminding himself that he hasn't committed to anything.**

**He says to the American, “So you speak Khmer? What do you do here? Teach?”  
“Yeah, actually, I teach in the high school in Takeo province.“**

**He asks how long has she been here, but she doesn't answer. In fact, it's becoming obvious that she doesn't want to know him.**

**Dobbsy feels a thumping in his ears as his heart races. He's all kinds of pissed off at this girl judging him, taking inventory of his being in such a small window of time.**

**He says, “Don't pretend like you know how it is. You snap your fingers and get dates. Guys have to wait for years alone sometimes. When have you ever done that? It's like crawling in a desert—you never think you're going to see civilization again and when you do, it turns out to be some hallucination caused by your totally bleak situation.”**

**“Pretending that what you said wasn't a total cop-out, I'll ask you this: why come all the way to Cambodia to find someone? Why are you here in the Heart of Darkness? There are women in America who have casual relationships.”**

**Dobbsy stutters something and pauses for a long time, then he flounders into a diatribe.**

**“Because I’m no one here— I don’t have an identity. No one expects anything from me other than my paying my bar tab or hotel bill. It doesn’t matter what my name is. I could use a fake one and change it every day and no one would care. It doesn’t matter what happened back home. My college degree doesn’t mean anything other than I can speak English well. You see this is the little section of the world where I can avoid all responsibility and test this world we live in because I need to know who I am and what I’m supposed to act like in this life. This world says we’re all just cogs in the wheel of evolution—that he who spreads his DNA around the most is the winner in the game of life. So what’s to stop me? I’m just doing what my genes tell me to.”**

**She takes all this in, “But did you ever think that the reason you want to be in a place where you’re really anonymous is because you feel isolated back home in America. You want to find yourself overseas because back there it’s all a self-perpetuated cycle running on infinitely. You don’t know what to look for because you’re desensitized and numb. You’re disconnected. That’s why it’s easier to come to a whole new place and do your social experiments.”**

**The sex worker Allain doesn’t really know what’s going on. She’s downing a bunch of alcohol, figuring she needs to get loaded before she hops into the sack with Dobbsy. She looks at him for a moment then reaches over to bite on his mouth some more.**

**But by this time, Dobbsy’s lost interest. He’s been confronted with the essential paradox of his being. He’s staring the abyss in the face, and it looks like an American girl with a name he doesn’t know and a life he doesn’t know anything about.**

You'd figure with all this technology and all the communication spheres we'd be at some pinnacle of communication right now. But even with all this media and information flowing constantly at faster and faster rates, all we've seem to have gotten good at is acquiring more gadgets. We look to the next electronic system or device to be the fix-all. The guy who said that technology cuts us up into little pieces, well he also claimed that all things, including ideas and technology, will eventually accelerate to such a rate that they reverse characteristics—like the flight controls of a jet that invert once it hits the sound barrier.

This guy who called himself Dobby for a month in Phnom Penh just now realized how far he had travelled on this technological highway, how all along the way he had cut himself up into tiny pieces, like bits of information and passed himself all across the world before he even got out to see the world in the flesh. He hadn't seen it before, until this moment, but he now saw how dissected his reality was and how all the people he knew, all the ones he had met here, and all the girls he had ever liked had been carved up too.

He felt suddenly aware of how torn apart he was.

Then the girl reached over to kiss him and bit him instead.



**Back at the Mosquito Bar, Sandy leans back and rubs his forearm against his mouth and says, “Jesus, man. I've never heard of anything like that...you know, how you said that all things will keep gaining speed until they reverse. It's almost like a Ying-Yang thing—a dichotomy. Like how Science was totally mechanical under Newton's direction, until it became so mechanical that it reversed into relativity and quantum mechanics. What's that called?”**

**“A chiasmus, technically. Usually it refers to the place where the nerves in your eyes cross. Most people don't know it, but we see the world upside down and our minds reorient it. “**

**“Well, Dobbsy, I'm feeling pretty upside down right now. Can't wait to get home and see something familiar. I feel like I'm going back there with a new lease on life. You know what I've noticed, man? These Cambodians are so friendly. I walk down the street and have a conversation with just about anyone I see. Everyone says hi to each other and is respectful. I'm going to try and bring that home with me. I think,**

**for me, Buddhism is all about meeting people. That's what enlightenment is. That's what this country has shown me."**

**Dobbsy nods, saying "Yeah. It's not really the same in America, is it? You walk down the street and try to greet all the people you cross paths with. Most of the time you get a blank stare or you're ignored. Sometimes you get the idea that the girl you just waved hello to thinks you're some kind of creep or weirdo. Guys size you up to see who'll win a fight. Seems like there's a lot of miscommunication going on. Here you're in a place where you're almost guaranteed to feel like a fool. It makes you take more risks. You can't help but lose your inhibitions in some way. You find out what will happen when the lines between what's possible and impossible blur and disappear. Sometimes nothing. But you stare it in the face."**

**Sandy laughed at that, recalling his fever. He replied, "You know what I'm gonna do when I'm back? I'm going to walk all around town like I'm a tourist—like I'm eternally wandering through a memorial site or a museum, pretending people are works of art and I'm there to see them and pay my respects."**

**Dobbsy took a pull from his beer and said, "You'll have my respect if you can keep that up, Sand man. I might try to get enlightened, too—unhook the computer and television for a while when I get back."**

**Across the Mosquito bar, Griff is looking at Lanie who's sitting next to him. He's wondering something. He edges closer to where she's sitting.**

**"Hey, it's Lanie, right? Hey I want to ask you a question. Did you get separated from your friends or are you just out by yourself?"**

**"I'm out by myself tonight. Why?"**

**You don't think it's dangerous, then?**

**No, I've actually felt pretty safe while I've been here in Cambodia. It's funny, I mentioned that to one of the people in my group the other day. How I felt almost at home in this culture. I don't feel as safe walking around American cities like L.A. and Austin. I was afraid before I came here. I remember lying in bed wondering if I was being sent to a dangerous land. I didn't know what to expect. But after all of the culture shock, after about a week or so, I started to get into the Cambodian culture. Everyone is just so amazing and friendly here.**

**So you came with a group then?**

**Yeah. A social work group from Texas State University.**

**Where's that?**

**San Marcos—it's a little south of Austin.**

**Ok, right on. I know where that's at. So how long have you been here? Where's your group?**

**They went back to the States already. I decided to postpone my flight and stay in the city a few more days. I needed some time to reflect on all the things I've seen. And I wanted to be alone. Well, what about you, though? What brings you to Cambodia? Do you live here?**

**Nah. My deal is I came here earlier this year for a study abroad, like you, and then just decided that I wanted to come back and spend some more time here. I love Cambodia. It's a culture that can really teach Americans about themselves. I think we can learn from their history. But I also think that we should be more aware of the image we Americans spread across the world. I came back because I felt there was a**

**message here and I needed to find out what it was and communicate it as best as I can to everyone back home. I'm sort of a writer. I mean, that's what I think I want to be. Actually, I came to that conclusion after coming here in January. You could say that this country has changed me.**

**Me too. Since you're a writer, I want to tell you my story, Griff. What I think of Cambodia. After touring the genocide memorials and learning about the history, I'm struck about this idea of progress and what we humans will do to achieve such an idealistic goal. The Khmer Rouge practiced their cruelties against their own people in the name of progress—they called what they were doing a “democracy” and a “utopia.” While touring the genocide museum and the Killing Field memorial, I felt grief. There is no getting around it, though, you can't help but be sad that this happened. Worse yet, the atrocities committed in the name of democracy in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge era are still committed today, sometimes by our own government. I have to wonder about such attempts at freedom as if by engendering suffering we can rid the world of it. It seems unreasonable to me. Instead of inflicting wars on countries or scarring their land and people with bombs and destruction, instead of causing more pain, what if the American people were brave enough to fight a war with pure conscience—by making tyrannical governments and the people they control more aware of the consequences that comes with taking things to such an extreme. These are the thoughts I will take back with me. They're in my head all day long. But let me start at the beginning, and you'll see where they came from.**

## S – 21

After arriving the night before, jet-lagged and bleary-eyed, I slept well and with a full stomach from the welcoming banquet—a mix of east and west (think tempura vegetables, French fries, sesame chicken that reminded me of the Thai restaurant back home, fish from the Mekong River, a green curry dish, and a whole mountain of rice in a big porcelain bowl)--in a seven course meal at the Two Fish restaurant just down the street from our hotel.

But oh how this first day arrives: the slow blush of day break travels through the trammeling night, the hum of motobikes passing by and honking as they cross the intersection outside the room signals activity within the capital city.

Voices leak up from the lobby downstairs with a brief cadence of shoes on the teakwood floor as some unknown form ascends from below.

I wake up before my alarm goes off and prepare for the day by putting essential things in my day pack and the rest in my large 6000 cubit backpack—this pack I left in my room at the hotel Anise, a bit paranoid about leaving it there. I lock the door and go downstairs to join my roommate and have breakfast.

Descending, I cross paths with a hotel staff and exchange an awkward hello that leaves me smiling.

I step out into the warm and humid morning. I look about the downstairs area sheepishly and see some of our group members sitting outside--I walk toward the patio directly across from the stairs and into the sunlight, blinking and rubbing my

eyes. The patio is fenced in with green foliage except for a break at the entrance—in the central of the outside entrance is a lily pond in a large, orange ceramic flower pot. A spirit house flanks the outside wall—many incense sticks jut from the miniature temple's entrance.

I look around, spot my roommate, and take a seat beside her, sinking down into the over-sized wicker chair. We say our good mornings, and I look at what she has been served: a very Western breakfast--an omelet with bacon, a tangerine, and a baguette.

Before I left the States, I (and everyone else) mused that we might be starving here or just eating rice all the time.

We depart from the hotel by way of tuk-tuk--a cart pulled by a motorcycle. The carts come in all colors and conditions. Some seat four, some two. Traveling by tuk-tuk gives you the same feeling as riding on a motorcycle—you are exposed to the city and the traffic. You're right in the middle of it, and it's exciting. There is no barrier of glass to separate you from the world around. So we all pile into the carts, four at a time until we're ready to go.

The flow of traffic operates in the spirit of Buddhism: there are very few traffic lights, so, when you want to turn or pass something or even cross the street, you just go for it and proceed slowly; you make space for yourself and the people accommodate you. They slow down or angle around. No one flips you off or gets angry like in crabby old America. Driving isn't some competition to be won. People don't listen to music in their cars because that would distract them from the scene before them and working their way through it. As crazy as it seems, it all works and

people get where they're going without hassle or injury. Just get in there—make a space—look around—arrive. The streets are an endless parade of Khmer people riding motorcycles, mopeds, or bicycles. Most people cannot afford a car.

Just then: three people on a motorcycle pass us as we make a turn. We see a baby cradled in a woman's arms as she sits side-saddle. A teenage girl on an old, rusty, bicycle rides on the side of the road. She is wearing a legionnaire's cap and a surgical mask. She is going the wrong way, heading against the flow of traffic. No big deal.

Two Buddhist monks in orange saffron robes catch a lift on back of a small, black motorcycle being driven by a middle-aged man wearing a bicycle helmet.

We go down the main boulevard to the west for a few blocks and then turn toward the south and follow a smaller street. As we start to slow, we see a group of men along the side of the road. They're making parking difficult, so our tuk-tuk driver pulls up inches from one of them—slowing down recklessly as if to give the man a signal to get lost.

As I connect this instance to where we are, I realize we've arrived at the genocide museum, Toul Sleng, or S-21 as the Khmer Rouge innocuously called it in that bloody era.

The group of men before us and standing outside of the museum are beggars. They bow low with mangled bodies and faces. We were advised by our tour leader, Scotty, not to support the begging population. I walk past them quickly and say no softly, with no agitation in my voice. I regret it immediately but do nothing about it. The day unfolds and I move with it.

We assemble in front of Scotty right in the middle of the pavement. There are people trickling in behind us and walking around us. A pair of people walk around the courtyard and talk softly to each other. A slight but steady breeze rolls across the scene and the sky is overcast, which adds to the tension. I wonder if I can still smell death from inside of the buildings. I certainly feel something reaching past the stillness here in the courtyard. They say monks have blessed this ground ever since the Khmer Rouge were ousted in 1979. I say no amount of blessing can clear this blotch from the conscience. Perhaps that is what we feel here, and we give it the name “wind.”

Scotty’s kiwi-accented voice tells the history:

This high school was used by the Khmer Rouge to imprison and interrogate prisoners, mostly other Cambodians, for information from 1975 to 1979-- when the Vietnamese invaded the city. In those years, if anyone thought you were against the regime or did not support Pol Pot absolutely, the person was considered a traitor by the regime and their military. Men were taken from their families under the pretense of going to learning sessions and brought here. They were told to give their life stories and admit that they were involved with the C.I.A. or the American Government. They were told to confess that they hated the Khmer government and didn't love Cambodia. They could say nothing bad about the country. Historians estimate that over 17000 people were brought here to Toul Sleng in those four years of Khmer Rouge rule. Of these thousands, only seven survived--one of them, Vann Nath, who was an artist, came back afterwards and set up this genocide museum-- and you can see the paintings he made of the torturing and things.

**Scotty's voice broke through the silence his own pronouncement had created.**

**So you guys can wander around.**

**He points to a far building of the high school and says we'll meet on the third floor of this building at 10:30 for a film.**

**Everybody in the group looks at each other blankly. Slowly and timidly, they pair or group up, then head in the direction the main buildings.**

**Instead of going immediately, I linger a minute, look around the courtyard and try to capture the whole scene. I notice the trees: a type I haven't ever seen before but beautiful all the same. They are relatively small and leafless--maybe because it's winter here. They twist laterally with the result that they look like hands with white blossoms—the trees are planted in rows along the wall and the southern part of the courtyard next to one of the main buildings. Right next to this row is a collection of graves.**

**Most of the group ambles toward this southern main building. I turn to the west and head toward another one. I do not want to shuffle through these displays like some group of tourists—I want to look upon them as if they mean something, not just pass an eye over them, flinch and then move away, being carried faster and faster toward the exit by emotion. I want to resist the feeling that my own reactions are more important than what has happened here. There will be time for the more emotional reactions when we return and this ominous but light breeze no longer passes across my face.**

**I enter the building and see five large display cases spanning the room, filled with photos of Cambodians—all dressed in black work shirts and wearing upon their**

faces the bleak look of someone captured, someone who suspected the end to their life had come to them. The days and weeks before had become increasingly strange and now this strangeness had morphed into the blatant face of something terrible—something that had been growing in that strange quiet and now possessed the guards and used them as hands to perform its carnage.

I looked at each photograph, trying to concentrate on each face without trying to sweep my gaze across them and lose the individual bleakness reflected in each prisoner's worried eyes.

These portraits answered my previous question. I could no longer smell anything resembling death, but here it was, projected in their eyes. I could sense it. I could see it. Grief worked its way into my stomach like a slow-rising cloud dispersing its vapor throughout my body. I tried to control the emotion as I shifted my gaze among the portraits—trying to honor each prisoner's face and memory—trying to tie some meaning to the agony—tried to imagine something that was unfathomable.

I shuffled across the glass display and passed by tourists doing the same as I—a French family led by a Khmer guide stopped in front of a display to hear something of the past explained:

She pointed to the picture of a younger woman wearing a black work shirt and said that this woman was a school teacher who had been brought to S-21 because she and her husband were suspected to have ties with the old regime. She had been brought here with her infant son and, when she arrived, the baby was taken from her arms and given to the guards. Many of the prisoners while they were in S-21 thought that the babies and children the Khmer Rouge took from their families

would be taken to an orphanage. It was later found out that the Khmer Rouge killed the children by smashing their heads against palm trees.

The French family let out a collective groan.

The mother asked, "Who would kill children like that? I just don't understand why. It's not human."

The guide responded, "The guards were told to do these things for the good of the country. In Pol Pot's regime the motto was that it's better to make a mistake and kill someone innocent than to allow someone guilty to live and give information against the government. If this answer wasn't good enough, the head guards would tell the other guards and you know, threaten them, and say that if they didn't do these thing--do their duties--than they would be killed too. And the guards--some of them were so young, like 13 or 15--were afraid. Others just believed in the Angkar and their ideas--they thought all of this was necessary for Cambodia's growth as a democratic country and for the country to be great, you know."

I had been listening to the story when my eyes and the guide's locked. I just nodded, mostly in shock and let out a nearly inaudible grunt as I moved away from the family and the guide and back to the doorway, I passed many people on the way.

Outside, I decided to sit on a nearby bench outside of the building with the portraits and be alone with my thoughts. All of this has drawn me far into an interior landscape. I pulled my journal from my backpack and took out a pencil.

In the courtyard of Toul Sleng, the secret prison in Phnom Penh, I wondered how all of this could have been done without conscience or outrage. It can be said that what has happened here was done in the name of progress--what Pol Pot, or Brother

**Number 1, called a “great leap forward.” Progress: what is it? Some illusory idea of the future that pulls the present towards it--here in Cambodia that utopian ideal held such gravity in the present that the people were torn in half and discarded by its sheer intensity. What misguided attempt is this to perfect the troubled world? And why has it happened so often in the Earth’s long history?**

**I closed the journal as my mind settled on this question. I rise from the bench underneath the trees and moved along a sidewalk that took me past a tall rudimentary structure with a sign next to it. The sign read: “THE GALLOWS” in both English and Khmer.**

**How ironic is it that progress uses the same mechanisms of torture and death as those from deep within history’s pages?**

**On the first floor in the southern-most building are rooms with single beds. In most an iron ankle-lock lays on the mattress-less bed frame--this is where prisoners where tortured for days on end. There are bloodstains on the floor still. Over the bed is a photograph of one of the Khmer men tortured here--an emaciated and twisted skeleton of a form laying lifeless here in the eternity of his physical and psychological torment. Dirty rags cover his face and hide his identity--he is otherwise naked, with his arms bound behind his back. A pool of blood so real it projects its color from within the black and white photo punctuates this poor soul’s sentence. Outside of this building a large sign reads “THE SECURITY OF REGULATION” and lists ten rules. I imagine prisoners heard these rules and understood them as their grim fate.**

**Imagine the slow and paranoid nights here in Toul Sleng, where the pained cries of all those imprisoned would not stop until late in the night. Zealous men and**

**children turned into perfect, unthinking soldiers through indoctrination videos would prowl with weapons made of electrical wires through the detention rooms, surveying the thirty or more naked and starving captives--men or women--asking why they seem nervous. “Do you have something to hide, brother?” they ask of some unlucky prisoner who shivers from the wind or itches from the scabies that irritate unwashed skin. They carry machetes or just rip off limbs from nearby banana trees that happen to have serrated stalks. Crickets or grasshoppers flutter in from a window and prisoners scramble for some meal other than the three spoonfuls of rice porridge they had that day.**

**Imagine the terror in all of this and wonder how it could be progress. To make a human an animal--does it not betray the reflection of something feral in the Khmer Rouge’s psyche? Ultimately the terror they inflicted turned in on itself as the population was mostly imprisoned or made slaves on cooperative farms and the soldiers started to suspect each other as accomplices aiding some foreign power against the Khmer Rouge government.**

**When the Vietnamese struck Phnom Penh with bombs, the guards took what was left of the prisoners and drove out of the city. They took the prisoners so they could carry food and made them march into the jungle. The chaos that ensued in the too dark nights made escaping finally an option. Let me say it again: of the 17,000 people brought to S-21 only 7 survived. No one was ever released or acquitted from the charges leveled against them.**

**From the outside of a small building you can see a highly symbolic image: two statues of the Buddha appear caged inside a building. The Buddha, a symbol of the**

**peace and compassion inside all beings is trapped by the transformation of this school to a prison—it is almost as if the mode of spiritual evolution has been inverted. In this version of the World Renowned One's history, where once the freeing of the mind from its rigid confinement was attained, the Buddha immediately forgot his enlightenment and, instead of teaching, went back into the palace and shut himself away from the suffering of the world.**

**Our groups meet upstairs on the third floor of the northern building in the video room. The room is crowded and humid. It's hard to find a seat, so I just stand at the door and watch the video. Someone gets up to leave, and I take their seat a few rows up.**

**The video is about Vann Nath, an artist kept alive in Toul Sleng solely because he could reproduce pictures or sculptures of Pol Pot. Think of that: you are kept alive only because you are good at producing the same image; no emotional catharsis is released as you create these things except some shallow or weak hope that in doing so you might be spared your life.**

**After the movie, we meet downstairs and return to the front gate. It is apparent that this place with a torturous history has had an impact on my group as well—they exhibit the same shocked and silent mood I have. All the same, we offer little smiles to each other and try to make some sort of conversation about food or what's next or the night before. As we pass through the gates the beggars again bow low and humble, imprisoned not by the place but by their lack of limbs and wealth. A few stop to give them money before we board our tuk-tuks and head off to the Killing Fields at the edge of the city.**

## The Killing Fields

**The road we follow to the outside of the city is the same one used by the Khmer Rouge to transport the prisoners from S-21 to their death. This fact is not lost on some of our group, and as we draw close to the Killing Fields memorial, sympathy and grief carry over from the tour through S-21.**

Cass looks out to the long stretches of rice fields on her right and says to the others:

I just can't get the thought out of my head. We're traveling on the same road the prisoners were taken. Can you just imagine...how horrifying that would be? To not know where you were going, just loaded up and smashed together with other prisoners in these carts, then pulled slowly toward the outside of the city.

They all nod or mutter in agreement, collectively finding few other thoughts except for the most obvious: who could do such a thing? When was this? Just thirty years ago?

The Killing Fields genocide memorial site resembles a Cambodian Buddhist pagoda, except it is taller and more slender: bleached white columns rise up maybe one hundred feet to support a gold and gray bricked roof, arranged with a gray equilateral triangle in the center and with four partitions expanding outward from behind this central triangle like beetle wings, decorated with yellow bricks that seem like lizard scales, while lingams resembling elephant trunks—a common architectural remnant of Cambodia's Hindu heritage—protrude from the apex of

the each of the four partitions. On top of this arrangement, there rises a steeple into the blue sky. Its stupa—a traditional Cambodian structure found mostly at sacred places or cemeteries—and thought to channel the spirits residing at their base into the spiritual realm. Even from a distance, you can see that a large portion of the memorial is constructed from glass. What you do not see until you are close is that within this glass are the skulls and bones of the people found at the Killing Fields.

The group approaches the memorial timidly from the gates. They slip off their shoes and leave them in cubby-holes at the foot of the steps—it's customary in Buddhism to take off your shoes when entering a temple or a holy ground. A Khmer man sits to the right underneath an umbrella and sells incense sticks or roses to visitors.

Lanie leaned up against Cass' shoulder and whispers, "Hey, could you take some pictures for me? I'm not feeling well."

Cass nods and says she will, her camera already in hand.

Lanie says to her, "Thanks, I've taken so many pictures today already, I just don't know if I can here. It's so overwhelming right now."

Cass reaches around her friend's shoulders and squeezes her as they move slowly up the steps to meet with the others.

At the front was a tour guide whom Scotty had hired at the ticketing booth outside the gate. The guide spoke quietly, but his English was easy to understand if you stood close to him.

—Thank you for coming today, I would like to tell you about this Buddhist memorial site and why it was built. Did you know that the Khmer Rouge killed over

one million people-- men, women, and children throughout the years of 1975 to 1979? And did you know that of that one million people, over 17,000 were brought from the Toul Sleng prison by carts here to be executed?

He stepped closer to the glass and pointed to the skulls inside. He carried on with the tour script.

—The prisoners were brought here and kept until they were executed. The Khmer Rouge would play music on speakers and make it very loud at night so that no one around would realize what they were doing here. But at night, they would take the prisoners that they had brought here and kill them. You will see where their bodies were placed out back in just a moment, but right now I would like to show you how the Khmer Rouge killed their victims.

He took a skull from the glass casing and held it up before his audience.  
—As you can see here, there is a big hole in the back of the skull. This is the skull's original condition and all of the skulls here have the same sort of mark—it is because the Khmer Rouge were too cheap to use bullets to execute their victims. Instead, they would just bash their victims in the back of the skull like this and throw them into shallow graves where they would die if they were not dead already. When we go out back, you will see that because the graves were so shallow, there is still bone in the ground—bone like teeth or fragments. There is also clothing. We find more and more pieces of bone every time it rains, and we keep all these fragments here. But please, look around at this memorial and in a minute we will continue on to the back.

The group filters inside—easier said than done because it meant squeezing

**through a narrow opening between the tall pillars.**

**Cass pulls her backpack to the front as she angles through. She positions her right arm in front of her so the camera will not scrape against the pillars' rough edges.**

**Lanie sits on a ledge near the shrine's entrance, choosing to look instead at the scenery. She's half sick from the change of diet and emotions that day had already brought out.**

**Inside, the rest of the group looks at the bones and clothing encased in the glass. The flash of digital cameras reflects off the glass. People crouch to get an eye-level angle of the bones and tattered and soiled prisoners' uniforms heaped in a big pile on the ground level of the shrine.**

**One guy, Trevor, swivels his Sony handy cam across the display in front of him, then steps back and angles the camera up towards the shrine's ceiling so the people watching at home will have an idea of the quantity of human remains contained here. He brings his camera down to film Cass's face as he says, "This is nuts."**

**Cass' looks stoic and bleak as she pronounces in agreement, "Yeah, man. It is." More hushed whispering passes from the mouth to the ear as the group tours the small rectangle of the shrine and filters out toward the back.**

**There the memorial includes a field crisscrossed with dirt pathways between pock-marked grassy fields. Small craters that are no more than three or four feet deep appear all across the landscape.**

**A few cows tethered with rope to a stake in the ground chew on the grass in order to keep it trim.**

The group meets in front of the tour guide as he introduces this place to them.

—Before the Khmer Rouge used this area to execute their victims, it was a Chinese cemetery. If you look here, you can see some of the old grave coverings.

He points to a large circular stone jutting from the side of a small knoll.

He continues saying, “And did you see the holes that cover this place? These are the graves that the Khmer Rouge used to bury their victims. “

Trevor takes his eyes off of the LCD viewfinder and asks in disbelief, “You mean, those holes are where they put thousands of bodies? “

The tour guide leans forward to hear as Trevor asks his question. He nods when he understands what is being asked and answers, “Yes. And because these graves were so shallow, this is the reason why we are still finding bones and clothes. We don't dig around for them; they just come up to the surface after it rains. Did you see over here the pieces of clothing? “

He points to the intersection of dirt pathways at the base of a large tree.

Cass moves toward where the guide points and sees bits of red and blue cloth on the ground. The immediacy of the prisoners' tribulations and deaths comes up fast and suddenly from within her. She stoops down on the ground to get a better look and in doing so her eyes cross white speckles in the red dirt. As she looks at the dirt and the prisoners' clothing, her mind connects some occluded fact: the pieces of white in the ground aren't rocks or any other part of natural debris, but a human molar and other white fragments of bone.

She feels disgust and looks around to notice that others are beginning to notice the same things. They're all looking down and about their feet, lifting the heels of

their shoes from the ground and looking all around with astonished faces. Some move off hurriedly from the path —as if walking the paths already marked with some many previous shoe impressions was some sort of sacrilege.

Others bend and examine the ground with great interest for a few seconds, and then slowly rise as the tour guide goes on.

—This big tree you see here was called the “Magic Tree” by the Khmer Rouge. It was where they would kill the infants that they had taken from their parents. They would swing them by the feet and hit their heads on the tree, then throw them into the graves. Over here, you can see a display of some of the bones found here. Some of them, as you can tell, are from infants.

Lanie had followed the tour from the very back of the group, gradually catching what was being said by the guide as members of the group talked among themselves about the atrocities committed in the spot where they were standing. She felt overwhelmed by a grief that she had thought she had moved past—had conquered, until now. The tragedy that had happened thirty years ago and the suffering contained in this spot made the memories of her father's death last year more salient. She remembered all the days she had spent at the side of his hospital bed until the end.

At the front of the memorial and near the beginning of the tour's circuit, the guide stops by a stout banana tree. He pushes the large leaves back and speaks to the group.

—And these trees have very unique stalks. If you look, you can see the ends of them are sharp, like a knife, you know. The Khmer Rouge would break off branches

**from these trees and use them as weapons. The edges are so sharp they could be used to cut off people's heads.**

**He raises his arms in a pantomime of an execution. He then brings them down and says, “Go ahead and feel them. But be careful.”**

**He smiles slightly as he says this and chuckles follow from the audience.**

**People step over to the tree and feel the edges of the stalks—sharp and small teeth no bigger than an inch line the outside like a steak knife. They call back to one another to have a look and run their fingers across the teeth. The tree becomes a weapon able to murder thousands right before their eyes.**

**The guide stays close by to answer any questions. Most people are too drained from touring both genocide museums to ask. What was needed was some processing time—some time to reflect and go through what had been seen and heard and the emotions evoked.**

**Cass moves away from the group as they shuffle towards the entrance, picking out the tuk-tuk they had ridden and getting into the carts.**

**She calls out “Hey girl” to Lanie, who was on the outskirts of memorial. As she makes eye contact, she can see tears still welling in her friend’s eyes.**

**Cass says, “You doing alright, Lanie?”**

**She nods as she entered the tuk-tuk.**

**“Yeah, I’m okay. I just need to sit down and think about all of this. You know, back there in the fields, I just kept thinking about my father and how it was when he died—and it just made me start bawling. “**

**She rubs her eyes.**

**“It's probably because just spiritually I feel so much suffering here and that was the way I connected with it. I don't understand why my father had to die the way he did—suffering, and here it was the same too. So many people suffered and died for no reason. I just don't get it...I just want people back home to understand and see the things that we have today. What would they think if they were confronted with all of these deaths?”**

**She looks at the stupa towering off in the distance—a magnificent structure housing grotesque artifacts. It seemed like such a contradiction but all the same, it was an apt symbol for Cambodia.**



After she finishes Griff thanks her for telling her story.

—It's good to know that some of the feelings I had are shared. Really, that's the reason I came back to Cambodia—to have more time to reflect and talk to people with similar ideas. My idea is to try to write all these feelings. Sometimes people need rational explanations to justify adopting a new perspective. I'd like to show people a global perspective. It's a tall order but my studies have shown me that the industrial worldview that flourished through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries caused a schism that made ecological and social disasters inevitable. I'll be blunt: I think we need to change the philosophical engine powering this thing; we need to switch from a theory of competition and consumption to a philosophy of meaning and quality. Even if you don't talk like that, Lanie, I think that this is the sort of change in attitude and consciousness that people experience in Cambodia.

—So you want to write an essay?

—Yeah. Something quasi-academic. Not a dissertation by any stretch; more of a syllogistic argument with sources. We'll see when it comes time to sit in front of the computer and peck away at the keyboard. The broad subject will be globalization and how some people think we shouldn't be in other countries at all, that we should just leave them all alone. But if you ask me, that's like saying we shouldn't go out into the wildernesses of the world to experience its beauty and strangeness. It seems too extreme a position, I think. But...let me show you something I wrote. While I was here before I stayed with a Cambodian family in Takeo province. Nicest people ever—I call them my Cambodian family. They're survivors of the Khmer Rouge era. Siphen, the mother, told me her story one night after dinner, and I thought it would be a good starting point for my project.

He reaches into his denim pockets and takes out a few scraps of folded paper. He smoothes out the creases while squinting to see the print on the page. He shifts the angle of his seat until the light blankets the page, making it readable in the night.

He takes a breath, and then begins.

## The Global Village

It's after dinner at Siphen and Mach's house in Takeo, Cambodia. We're sitting around a circular stone table and watching a Cambodian karaoke show on a television Siphen's brother, Pong, has mounted into the corner of their patio. We're eating fruit and Mach is telling me about an actress in the karaoke show while Siphen talks on her cell phone to her brother in Colorado.

After Siphen turns off the cell phone and rejoins the conversation, she looks over at me and asks, "Hey Griff, do you want to know the true Khmer Rouge story?"

Griff faintly remembered hearing the story for the first time in January. It was a story he had returned in July to hear again, but this time to record. Siphen tells this story to the groups of college students that come from Western countries like America or New Zealand to stay in their home in order to get a sense of what Cambodian life is like outside the tourist-friendly cities.

I don't recall how she started it the first time—the words she used, but I'm certain she smiled a bit before she began.

--My life was miserable when the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975. It was like a tiger creeping up behind you all the time. I was just a child then, though even now I remember the terrible black storm moving toward us. One night during the midnight hours of 1977, Khmer Rouge soldiers came to take my second brother away. They said it was to study, but everyone knew that meant they were taking the person to die.

**I really remember that night. It was July 1977. The soldiers knocked loudly on the front door and made a terrible amount of noise. My parents let them into the house.**

**They said “Wake up, Angkar needs to take your son away to study.”**

**It was very dark and my parents couldn’t see anything.**

**My parents asked them to leave their son to take care of his daughter and youngest sister, who are too young to understand the world.**

**Four soldiers with guns pushed into the house and pointed a gun at my father. They ordered him to give them my brother.**

**My brother was brave. He came out into the darkness and said, “Please release my family and especially my daughter and sister. I will follow you, but you should know that no one will live forever on this earth, not even you.”**

**The Khmer Rouge soldiers tied his hands and pushed him out of the house. My parents were shocked and could hardly say anything. It was like they were unconscious. My brother asked for water and said good-bye to us.**

**As they started to leave, my mother got up and tried to stop the soldiers from taking her son. She was hit with a gun, and they pushed her into the pond asking her, “Do you want to die the same day as your son?”**

**The soldiers laughed loudly and went to leave.**

**My father went to get my mother and carried her back into the house. She cried loudly, and I woke up and wondered why my life was so miserable.**

**And after that it was worse.**

**The whole family lived together in a small hut provided by the Khmer Rouge**

**organization called Angkar. Every day my parents and both my older brothers and my sister-in-law have to work outside in the rice fields all day with only a very small amount of rice porridge for lunch and dinner. Even though we had a house, most of the time the Khmer Rouge wouldn't let the workers come home to sleep; they would sleep in the fields. My niece and I stayed at home to look after each other. Most of the time we didn't have food to eat, and we weren't allowed to cook. We would have to go to the community kitchen where the food was cooked by a group of ladies chosen by the Angkar. The food we ate was rice porridge and water lily soup with very little fish in it. Every day I would have to go and beg for this food from the community kitchen. I would have to beg for myself and my younger niece. Sometimes I would have to eat wild beans or insects because we were given so little food. We weren't supposed to eat that stuff, but I was almost starving. Then one day I got very sick and my mother had to come back from the fields and beg the neighbors for extra food. She fed me what she got, a bit of rice. I felt a little bit better and she had to go back to work.**

**We survived. And many years after that, in 1979, the dark cloud that was the Khmer Rouge was gone.**

**My family was beginning to recover. My parents didn't want me or my niece to go to school because they had already lost two sons. They wanted us to stay close to home. But this made me sad, and I would sneak off to class and study with the community teacher. I enjoyed reading storybooks. One day I asked my parents to let me go to school every day. They agreed and after that I became successful in my studies.**

**After Siphen tells her story and we've watched the karaoke singers dance and sing for a while, we decide to go to sleep. It's a few minutes after I get into bed and fumble with the mosquito nets, making sure they're tightly tucked into the bottom of the bed, that they turn off the generator for their electricity. The night is mostly silent, except for the small splashes made by fish in the pond on the side of the house. The pond: that's where their house used to be until a U.S. bomber plane dropped its payload on it when bombing Ho Chi Minh's soldiers.**

**It's a few days afterward when I'm back in Phnom Penh and I realize how important it is for Americans to hear this story. The Khmer Rouge government took over Cambodia in the name of progress and democracy. They wanted to return Cambodia to its former prestige and stop depending on Western countries for stability. But what made them successful is that the population was uneducated about what those concepts meant.**

**From Cambodia's example we see what happens when a government loses the ability to look at itself objectively, even if they are chasing a noble goal like progress or utopia—an objective no one could say is undesirable. We also see what happens when the citizens of a country simply parrot the slogans given to them or lose the ability to question the government's methods.**

**These days you often here of some crisis: it was an ecological crisis before it was an economical one. Maybe we're just now finding out how much the two are related. But we cannot draw a line connecting these two systems without adding a third, society. It would seem that all our problems are entangled with one another, like a Gordian knot.**

**But I like to think of this all as ecology because it makes me think of the word “echo.” It suggests to me that the key to progress involves learning how to listen. Siphen’s story is an echo of history helping guide us away from such tragedies in the future. We should listen and we should remember.**



**Outside, the night was giving up its presence to a mellow blush of dawn on the horizon. The sound of motorbikes honking as they passed through intersections gradually picked up. Another day was announcing itself to the city of Phnom Penh. The words and stories echoed in the minds of those wanderers returning home today. But for every traveller returning home, another was arriving at the airport or by bus. A perpetual stream of them coming to take in the country and see their reflections.**

**Griff made his way outside and signalled a motorbike driver with his hand. He smiled at him and showed the driver a small business card that said Bodhi Tree and gave an address.**

**When he made it back to his room, he washed in a cold shower and packed his things for the airport. He was tired, but when you fly for over twenty hours, like from Cambodia to America, sleeping on the plane is la gift. You circumvent the feeling of limbo a bit.**

**His mind was afire with the night's conversation and the ideas of what he should write. The essay was an announcement of his coming to age within the global village**

**and what to do next. A game plan of sorts.**

**As he boarded the tuktuk and headed off toward the airport at the edge of the city, he looked at the streets for the last time and promised to remember them.**

**And when he got home and recovered from the jet-lag, he wrote what was in his heart.**

# **Us and Them: A Resonating Interval**

**The year 2008 has been one of the more political years I can remember. It seems that no matter the political orientation, be it Republican, Democrat, Anarchist or whatever, everyone is struggling to find a way to navigate safely through all of the various global disasters, be they environmental or economical. But no one has mentioned the crisis of the social system. No one has addressed a social ecology. This essay will elaborate on this theme, drawing on sources from disparate fields. The aim will be to show the reader that local actions and personal values affect people across the world over, and that, if we are going to help people in developing countries, we need to adopt a socio-ecological model that doesn't suggest to developing countries that they should industrialize as quickly as possible at the expense of their culture. Furthermore, technology should not be accumulated as status symbols but used in a manner that promotes meaningful communication instead of the promise of constant companionship via cell phone, email, or web-sites like MySpace or Facebook. Such is the scope of this essay.**

**The case must first be made that we are facing a social crisis. To do so, we need to look at language. As the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis claims, language creates our reality. In his essay, "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell explains that our language can be used as qualitative ruler—if you'll forgive the paradox. As he says, "[The English language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. "**

You wouldn't need to look any further to the muckraking of this year's election to see evidence of words with strong, historical values becoming nearly meaningless. When someone like Governor Sarah Palin says Barack Obama is a socialist, she really means he's a communist. She never explains why we should think so, but instead relies on the vagueness of the concept because, to many people, having socialist ideas equates to being a full-fledged Nazi. The labyrinth of logic made to reach this conclusion doesn't need any sort of validity or facts, but instead relies entirely on an inventory of associations called up in the individual's mental lexicon after hearing such a vague word suddenly come into play.

Through Cambodia, we can gauge Western values by examining what words are most frequently heard. As a young male travelling all through the country, I most often heard words having to do with bars, sex, genocide tours, and military weapons. I can only guess that for women it would be nearly the same, except instead of guns or sex, you would hear about massages and spa trips, not to say that such things are bad, only that they reflect an almost entirely Westernized tourist industry transplanted into an exotic location.

The message the West sends is that countries like Cambodia should become like us. This means to industrialize as quickly as possible. It also means that something happens within the culture's collective psychology: as mechanical automata are created so quickly and in such great numbers, they reverse characteristics from products to producers—replacing what was organic with a gear. This is no doubt hyperbole, but we should realize the kernel of truth it contains. Electronic media are introduced to a culture without explaining how technology can affect lives. It can certainly be argued

**that this is because in the West we are only now finding those effects out. The result is the accumulation of gadgets as mere status symbols and over-estimation of their capabilities. As it stands now, the Western world is trying to emerge from the mechanistic world view brought on by industrialization; the key to shifting paradigms is to use media and technology in a harmonious or ecological manner. Why then should we sell these products to other countries without making sure they know to do the same? If we thrust this technology upon other cultures, we may be setting them down a road that leads to the same robotism we are starting to overcome.**

**In Marshall McLuhan's essay, "Narcissus and Narcosis," we learn that media extends our senses many times beyond what they're physically capable of. The body in turn reacts to the media's images in the same way it would to any other injury—by numbing that part of the body. Psychologically, the irritated sense becomes numbed by this bodily response. In orthodox consumerism, we make the mistake of trying to fix the problem with more things—more time in front of the television or purchasing the latest technology as a cure-all. The gadget-lover in us builds an electronic environment that progressively obsolesces the natural environment, which includes the social system. The end result is a fragmentary worldview and a vivisectioned consciousness.**

**The problem was expressed differently a very long time ago by a Chinese sage who expressed even than that technology not only affected habits but also thoughts and values:**

**As Tzu-Gung was travelling through the regions north of the river Han, he saw an old man working in his vegetable garden. He had dug an irrigation ditch. The man would descend into the well, fetch up a vessel of water in his arms and pour it out into**

the ditch. While his efforts were tremendous, the results appeared to be very meager.

Tzu-Gung said, “There is a way whereby you can irrigate a hundred ditches in one day, and whereby you can do much with little effort. Would you not like to hear of it?”

Then the gardener stood up, looked at him, and said, “And what would that be?”

Tzu-Gung replied, “You take a wooden lever, weighted at the back and light in front. In this way you can bring water so quickly that it just gushes out. This is called a draw.”

Anger rose in the old man’s face, and he said, “I have heard my teacher say that whoever uses machines does all his work like a machine. He who does his work like a machine grows a heart like a machine, and he who carries the heart of a machine in his breast loses his simplicity. He who has lost his simplicity becomes unsure in the strivings of the soul. Uncertainty in the strivings of the soul is something which does not agree with honest sense. It is not that I do not know of such things; I am ashamed to use them.”

My over arching point is not that we should shun technology completely, like the old man, but that we should be aware of what it does to us, and what can happen when a country like Cambodia follows in our footsteps. The difference would be that in becoming conscious of how technology affects us, we would be “riding with the punch” instead of “taking it on the chin.” As a result, gadgets would no longer threaten to make servo-mechanisms of our unsuspecting population.

When we wake up from the industrial world devoid of meaning, we begin to undertake the “striving of the soul” because an imaginative part of us that had been

numbed begins to heal. Before it was given an abundance of other-worldly definitions, in Greek Soul meant the same thing as “mind” or “psyche.” A modern day psychologist of the soul, James Hillman (1989), makes a related point when he says “By soul I mean, first of all, a perspective rather than a substance, a viewpoint rather than a thing itself. Soul refers to the deepening of events into experiences. It makes meaning possible.” This statement stands in contrast to value-free science and the philosophy of the industrial revolution in that humans are fundamentally makers of meaning. It stands to reason, then, that an automated monoculture isn’t human; instead, diversity should be considered good. Cultural diversity makes humanity more meaningful because other cultures contrast with ours and cause us to question values. In turn, these questions deepen and enrich our sense of self.

Albert North Whitehead explained that the great discovery of the nineteenth century was the discovery of the technique of discovery. I propose that memory is the great discovery of our times. This “search for memory” is present both in medicine and society. Medically, we are concerned with treating diseases such as Alzheimer’s or dementia that severely hinder remembering events. In the field of neuroscience, researchers such as Antonio Damasio (2005), are finding there is no logic center in the brain, only a network of cells that store our memories and experiences. It follows, then, that in order to make a rational choice, one must rely more on emotion and memory than anything else. Logic, then, is a phenomena emerging from the concert of memory cells; our rationality stands on the shoulders of emotion and recollection. We should therefore be wary of a world view that fosters an automatic lifestyle because it could possibly erode memory, emotion, and our decision making ability.

The point can be extended into society. Just as our consciousness has been divided because of technology's increasing power and the psychological numbness that creates, it can be reversed through memory. To build an argument on top of a pun—we can heal dismemberment with remembering.

My experience in Cambodia has been so important to me because it is a country rediscovering and *remembering* its culture and history after the Khmer Rouge had tried to extinguish it by killing teachers, educated citizens, and artists. They shot up the Angkor temples with their machine guns, attempting to deface the ancient monuments so that people could not marvel at them.

There is evidence, however, that even in Cambodia this collective remembering has already become gummed up. An article in *The American Scholar* notes that “a generation [of Khmer] is growing up doubting the existence of the Khmer Rouge. Official textbooks barely mention the period, and survivors have difficulty telling their children and grandchildren about it” (2007). There has been a noticeable loss of traditional values and cultural heritage in Cambodia: modern technology like television disrupts the oral transmission of village history by elders. The U.N. has tried to arrange presentations in which elders can impart traditional ways of life to younger generations and they are also creating culture based books that will do the same (Endo, 2002). Sadly, the Angkor temples are being slowly destroyed by the tourist industry. The city outside the temples, Siem Reap, continues to construct more hotels close enough to the Angkor site that they draw water from beneath the temples, causing them to slowly sink into the ground (Tyler, 2007).

It is tough to conclude on such a bitter note, but as this essay draws to a close, I

**am reminded of all the changes and experiences that have happened since I left Cambodia. The feeling of journeying over seas and stones still remains as I step into a class room to deliver a presentation or sit across from an interviewer asking about my experience and observations. I pass on the reflections of Cambodia, certain that they have raised people's awareness of this country's culture and social issues. This essay broadly addressed how Cambodia and American culture interplay, even if we are a world away in distance. The aim is to make the resonance sounding off through the space between one of harmony.**

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